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THE FICTION OF PROSPER MÉRIMÉE.

PROSPER MÉRIMÉE is a novelist whose place in the evolution of fiction it is difficult to fix, and therefore peculiarly interesting to study. It is customary, and not unjust, to regard him as the successor of Stendhal, but he had in him elements of closer relation to George Sand and others that suggest Balzac, while perhaps, after all, he will be found more closely allied to Flaubert than to any of his early contemporaries. He became intimate with Stendhal in his youth, about 1823, and they shared in many sympathies and antipathies, especially in a contempt for the ethics of the bourgeoisie, which Mérimée expressed with an irony keener than Stendhal's and lighter than Flaubert's. The three were alike in their objectivity, and all excelled, though in different ways, in psychologic analysis. But in their romantic pessimism Mérimée and Flaubert part company with Stendhal, who never wholly threw off the rationalistic optimism of the eighteenth century, while Mérimée's cruel irony is more impassively indifferent than Flaubert's, having, as Lanson observes, little trace of the eighteenth century save in the audacious crudity and dry skepticism of his thought. With George Sand he shares the power of picturesque description, but he is too cynical to share her buoyancy. He has the somberness of Balzac, unrelieved by the latter's idealism; and he has Stendhal's morbid dread of being the dupe of his emotions, which in him showed itself in what none of these other four possessed—a high-bred, aristocratic, polished impassivity in his social bearing, and a corresponding pellucid but cold correctness in his style, where art hides art even more effectively than in Flaubert. His indifference goes so far as to suppress studiously all appearance of interest in his own work. He represents the most highly wrought of his novels as the accidental result of some experience of travel, and in one case, the "Chronicle of Charles IX.," anticipates the author

of the "Lady or the Tiger" with the suggestion that the reader shall choose whichever denouement may suit his fancy. Until the rise of Flaubert he was the best, almost the only, representative in France of the strictly objective school in fiction. It is here that his peculiar service lies.

Mérimée was a Parisian, born in 1803, and living just long enough to witness the bloody setting of the imperial sun, which had lighted the last two decades of his life with a sympathy that was both political and personal. Of his early life we know little more than that his family was well to do, and had on his mother's side a strain of English blood to which his countrymen were wont to attribute a certain austerity in his manners. He was educated for the bar and entered the civil service, but was sufficiently in touch with the literary currents of his time to be among the first to achieve notoriety in the romantic manner with a pretended translation from the Spanish, "*Le Théâtre de Clara Gazul*," published in 1825, and "*La Guzla*," a volume of pretended translations from the Illyrian, in 1827. Neither of these belong directly to our subject, yet both are characteristic of the man. He understood the creed of romanticism perfectly, he could say its shibboleth with faultless correctness, but he was very skeptical of the value of his accomplishment. As he tells us in a witty preface to "*La Guzla*," written in 1840, the creed of his fellow romanticists of 1827 was "no salvation without local color. We meant by 'local color' what they called *manners* in the seventeenth century, but we were very proud of our word, and we thought we had imagined both the name and the thing." He would have liked to visit some strange country with his friend Ampère, and as they had no money, the idea came to them to write their travels in advance and use the money to see whether they had made any mistakes. Mérimée was to take the literary side. He read a volume of travels, another of statistics, learned a few words of Slavonic, and wrote in a fortnight a collection of ballads, alleged translations that deceived the scholars of England, Germany, and Russia. "I could boast," he concludes, "that I had attained 'local color;' but the

process was so simple, so easy, that I began to doubt the merit of it."

The year following "*La Guzla*" saw Mérimée's first work in dramatic fiction, "*La Jacquerie*" (1828), interesting chiefly because it showed at the outset all the qualities, except polish of diction, that were to mark his work to the close. These were an astonishing command of language, a remarkable power of conveying to the reader the spirit of a distant age and foreign scene—in this case the medieval France of the peasant war (1358), a predilection for scenes of terror and blood, and the peculiarly cruel vein of irony already noticed.

But in the next year (1829) "*La Jacquerie*" was surpassed in all its qualities by "*Le Chronique du Règne de Charles IX.*," whose central scene is the massacre of St. Bartholomew, which to him seems to illustrate the observation that all morality is relative, and suggests that "the decadence of energetic passion has been to the gain of tranquillity and, perhaps, of happiness." The story is told with great verve, and is full of adventure, of murder and blood; but there is shrewd historical analysis also, with picturesque scenes of bygone manners. The irony that runs through all Mérimée's fiction concentrates here its brightest flashes in the sermon of Père Lubin, and its most mordant bitterness in the spiritual brawl of priest and parson over the bed of the dying Voltairean Mergy, while the novel ends nonchalantly with a request to the reader to finish the story as best suits his fancy. As a whole, "*Le Chronique*" is a well-told story, but it lacks the stylistic finish and the intensity of the short stories of this same year. In the evolution of fiction its place is with "*La Jacquerie*" in the brief and brilliant series of French historical novels, inspired by Walter Scott, inaugurated by Vigny's "*Cinq-Mars*," and drowned in the flood of Dumas' fiction.

Mérimée now began to write short stories for the "*Revue de Paris*" and the "*Révue des Deux Mondes*," and continued the latter relation for twelve years. The stories of 1829 and 1830, with two exceptions first published after his death, were

gathered in 1833 in "Mosaïque;" in the same year appeared also a longer story, "La Double Méprise." Several volumes of history and travel followed, and Mérimée's next contribution to fiction was "Colomba" (1840), which was followed by "Carmen" in 1847, and by another collection of tales in 1852. The posthumously printed "Dernières Nouvelles" complete his work in this field. The stories occupy, as now arranged, six volumes: 1. Carmen, Arsène Guillot, l'Abbé Aubain, La Dame de Pique, Les Bohémiens, Le Hussard (the last three translations from Pushkin, with extracts from Nicolas Gogol). 2. Chronique du Règne de Charles IX. 3. Colomba, la Vénus d'Ille, Les Ames du Purgatoire. 4. La Double Méprise (with La Guzla). 5. Dernières Nouvelles: Lokis, il Viccolo di Madama Lucrezia, La Chambre Bleue, Djoumane, Le Coup de Pistolet (translated from Pushkin), Federigo, les Sorcières Espagnoles. 6. Mosaïque, Matéo Falcone, La Vision de Charles XI., L'Enlèvement de la Rédoute, Tamango, La Perle de Tolède, La Partie de Tric-Trac, Le Vase Etrusque.

The close of 1830 showed Mérimée in possession of all his powers as a writer of fiction. In the preceding year he had written "Federigo" (1829), a Neapolitan legend that would be utterly blasphemous if it were not so naively childish and so curious in its intermingling of classic mythology with the teaching of the Roman Church. He had also written "l'Enlèvement de la Redoute" (1829), a story from Napoleon's Russian campaign that, as Mr. Pater says, takes us in ten pages close up to the cannon's mouth, with a restrained concision that makes it almost a perfect model of the short story. And if here his style reaches the climax of his powers, in "Matéo Falcone" (1829) his irony reaches the utmost pitch of its cruelty. Here is a man who has murdered his rival in love and yet has so Corsican a feeling of honor that he kills his son, a boy of ten, for failing in hospitality to a criminal, leaving the reader to conclude that, when civilization is stripped off, all moral action is the result of prejudice and of fatality. And yet one hesitates to accord "Matéo Falcone" the supreme touch of pessimistic irony when one reads the

ghastly story of Tamango (1829), the slave-selling negro chief, and the slaver captain Ledoux, who insisted that on his ship, the "Hope," "one must show humanity and leave a negro at least five feet by two to enjoy himself during a six weeks' passage, for after all the blacks are men like the whites." This genial trader who varnished his fetters is massacred with his crew by the kidnapped Tamango; and the negroes, masters of a craft that they can neither sail nor steer, die the cannibal victims of drink, of one another, and of starvation; all but their chief, whom irony reserves to work for the English Government on the fortifications of Jamaica till fever releases him from this "liberty at six cents a day." Perhaps more bestial horror has never been crowded into so little room or recounted with such cold precision as in this story.

The work of 1829 was completed by the less-significant semihistorical "Vision of Charles XI.," and, by a little imitation from the Spanish in rhythmic prose, "La Perle de Tolède." Then, 1830, that annus mirabilis of French literature, brought "Le Vase Etrusque" and *La Partie de Tric-Trac*. To this year belongs also the "Spanish Witches" where the superstitious shrewdness of the Valencian peasantry is most cleverly and romantically shown, though it is perhaps hardly equal in art to the other work of 1830.

In "Le Vase Etrusque," a story less well constructed than is usual with Mérimée, love and then jealousy seize on the else calm and clear mind of Saint-Clair and lead him with an inexorable fatality to destruction. In his proud nature, inclined to retrospect, ambitious, distraught, opinionated, and reserved, there seem many traits of Mérimée's self. The same fatalism of crime impels the gambler to fraud in "La Partie de Tric-Trac." "When I swindled that Dutchman I thought only of winning twenty-five napoleons. I did not think of Gabrielle. That is why I despise myself," says Lieutenant Roger, who was else, we are told, loyal and brave. And so generally in the stories that make up "Mosaïque" we have tragic terror but not tragic pity, the freest development of passion, such as Stendhal had sought,

with an even greater affectation of indifference and moral negation.

Always to some extent an enemy of the conventional, Mérimée was perhaps least so in "*La Double Méprise* (1833), which seems rather in the manner of Bourget or of Prévost, a bit of pathological psychology. It is the story of the unhappy marriage of Julie and the Marquis de Chaverny, whose coarse humor grates on the nerves of his wife, as appears in several admirable domestic scenes. Châteaufort, a young officer, tries to profit by her humor, but she feels no affinity for him. Then her love's complement appears, Darcy, in whom it is said Mérimée sought to paint himself, with a little vanity of vice, as he had done perhaps also in the Saint-Clair of "*Le Vase Etrusque*." To him her soul is drawn like a boat sucked into a whirlpool. In vain does he reveal himself in unfavorable lights, as in the cleverly interposed episode of a rescued Turkish slave. She yields, she hardly knows how or why, to his cynical and cold fascination, and then in her moral revulsion works herself into a fever of which she dies. "Write to him," she bids her nurse as she lapses from consciousness, "write to him that he does not know me; that I do not know him." That is the "double misunderstanding." And yet, concludes the author, "These two hearts that misunderstood were perhaps made for one another."

"*Les Ames du Purgatoire*" (1834), is a development of the legend of Don Juan de Marañá, the incarnation of materialistic will trampling for his lusts on the honor of women, the lives of men, and the love of God, and then converted by a terrifying vision and turning his strong will toward furious penitence, as unspiritual at the last as at the first. And beside him is the enigmatic figure of Dona Theresa, who loves, like Chimène, her father's murderer, and, though herself a professed nun, consents, as though compelled, to escape with her lover and dies of disappointment as she would have died of the realization of her hope. Here, too, love is a tragic fatality, respecting neither law nor life.

A more exquisite work of art is "*La Vénus d'Ille* (1837),

drawn from a medieval Latin legend contained in the chronicle of Herman Corner. This Venus is an ancient statue of *Venus turbulenta*, in which the artist has impersonated malicious absence of all sympathy and the irony of cruel disdain. On her bronze finger a youth on his marriage day places in sport his betrothal ring, and at night she comes to claim his body and soul, to press him to death in her metal arms, herself a symbol of imperious passion. The story is old in its outline, but in the beauty of its setting and in the skill with which from an opening of gross and even humorous commonplace it evolves and maintains an atmosphere of terror it is unsurpassed. First the scene, the weird slopes of the Pyrenees and the plain of Toulouse below, with its relics of an irrepressible paganism contrasting with the sordid materialism or the bourgeois comfort of its inhabitants; then the old goddess exhumed to be witness of the new feast, the insult to her divinity, her anger, her vengeance, and the strange veil of mystery that the author has thrown over the whole—give to the supernatural the illusion of reality.

"Colomba" followed "La Vénus d' Ille" in 1840. Since 1835 Mérimée had been much occupied with notes of archaeological travel, in the course of which he had spent two months in Corsica, and had published a volume of his impressions. Corsica is also the scene of "Colomba," in whose two hundred pages there is probably more exotic life than in any work of the French language, unless it be "Le Mariage de Loti." The book is still, what it was from the beginning, by far the most popular work of its author, and, whether true or false in its local color, it certainly produces the illusion of reality. To the strange life, material and moral, of the Corsican *maquis* we are introduced by an artistic prelude that brings to the island Col. Nevil and his daughter Lydia, an Englishman and an English girl, treated conventionally but with ironic humor and possibly with more justice than English critics have liked to admit; for Mérimée knew England, and his English are never grotesque caricatures of *l'anglais waterproof et mackintosh*, like the jumping-jacks of Gautier's fancy. On

the boat with the Nevils is Orso, an officer, Corsican by birth but now apparently wholly French in spirit, in whom Lydia shows a frank and quite English interest. The party reach Ajaccio, and we get the external local color while still moving in the conventional world of social ideas. But presently this exotic calm is disturbed by the advent of Orso's sister Colomba, a true Corsican nature strangely mixed of charm and savagery. She is beautiful, graceful, cunning, unscrupulous, devoted, morbidly revengeful, and winsomely loving. The psychic purpose of the story is to show how this native ferment will plant itself in Orso's heart and permeate his blood, transforming him, to his own surprise, into the hero of a vendetta; for Colomba thinks that the Baricini have wronged her father, who is dead, and with that fierce family pride that is the dominant passion of the Corsican, she looks to her brother for vengeance and nurses with almost diabolical malignity the old spirit. The psychologic touches here are so firm, the graduation in the notes so perfect, that we find ourselves accepting as natural the life and modes of thought of the bandit Brandolaccio, or of feuds that divide communities in fiercest hate and intrude themselves even into the chants improvised at the burials of the dead. "I must have the hand that fired, the eye that aimed, and the mind that conceived the deed," she sang, and did not rest till the sons were dead, and the father a senile idiot, shrinking in terror from her reminder of her triumphant vengeance. When Orso has killed the brothers who had fired on him from ambush, it seems to us as natural for a bandit to ask pardon for regretting the victims of so fine a shot as it is for the Colonel to desire a coroner's inquest; as natural for the little bandit girl to announce their deaths by the sign of the cross as for the Englishman first with his sense of law to have wished the double-barrelled gun he had given Orso at the bottom of the sea, and then with his own viking blood stirred to add, "Brave fellow! I'm glad he had it." Indeed, when the tale is over and Orso is taking leave of the freebooters to return to civilization with his English bride, Castriconi seems half right when he says: "Believe

me, Mr. Orso, nothing's comparable to a bandit's life . . . if only one is better armed and more sensible than Don Quixote."

Sainte-Beuve compares *Colomba* to *Electra* urging Orestes to avenge the death of Agamemnon. Her joy in conquering her brother's mind to serve her passion seems to him classic in a truer sense than that of Racine. Yet the story is the most cheerful, indeed, the only cheerful book of Mérimée. We pass through murder, but we come to marriage-bells, and the irony is less persistently sardonic. His pessimistic fancy habitually seeks escape from present conditions by creating a world of fiercer primordial passions, but he has never treated conventional society with such genial persiflage as in "*Colomba*."

This gentler tone characterizes also Mérimée's next story, "*Arsène Guillot*" (1844), a bit of tender pathos standing quite alone in his fiction. The central figure here is a frail girl who, on her mother's death and the desertion of lovers, attempts suicide and dies after an illness of the shock and of consumption. During her illness she is cared for by the pious Madame de Piennes, who had become interested in her through a meeting at a church whither she had gone to burn a candle before the image of St. Roch, for her mother had told her that this celestial patron, if placated, would surely provide her with a human one. Both women have formerly enjoyed the affection, platonic or material, of Max, who meets Madame de Piennes by Arsène's bedside and is, as it were, united to her by Arsène's dying words. Thinking her dead, the pitying Max exclaimed: "What happiness had she in this world?" All at once, as though reanimated at his voice, she opened her eyes and murmured, "I have loved;" and while of course, as the author remarks, he has said nothing to authorize rash judgments, he has said that on Arsène's tombstone might be traced in a lady's hand the words: "Poor Arsène, pray for us." This is certainly pathetic, but perhaps hardly "ethically acceptable."¹

¹ Mr. Pater so pronounced it. *Fortnightly Review*, December, 1890, p. 662.

The irony with which this tale is interpenetrated is directed partly against the tendency to think ill or even cruelly of the socially or morally unfortunate, and partly against the unnecessary torture of the feelings inflicted by well-intentioned but canting piety. The little story is full of lines that cling like barbed arrows. At the opening we read of the aristocratic who "buy the permission to pray to God apart from the rest of the faithful." The cynicism of the doctor is untranslatable, but among the motives of Madame de Piennes' interest we are expressly told to reckon "that sentiment of curiosity that many virtuous women feel to make the acquaintance of a woman of another sort." To say that hell is paved with good intentions or with women's tongues comes with Mérimée to the same thing, "for women, I think, always mean well." Such passages, with the candle of St. Roch and the denouement, will suggest an ethical tone that seems perhaps less commendable than that of "Colomba" or of "Carmen," while in its art the story yields to neither.

The reader feels more at ease with Mérimée's morality, and more disposed to enjoy his art, when the scene is foreign to our time or mode of thought, and as, to speak of masterpieces only, "Colomba" is more satisfactory than the "Vénus d'Ille" so "Carmen" (1845) is a more unalloyed literary feast than "Arsène Guillot." The posthumously published "Viccolo di Madama Lucrezia," of 1846, also does well to place in a foreign country its tragic intensity of passion and spice of diablerie, though here the author, affecting an indifference that suggests Stendhal, has shown us too much of the machinery of his method to preserve the artistic illusion.

In "Carmen" there is something of the same affectation. The story is introduced by the way, as an incident in the researches of an antiquarian; and when it is over, the author goes on as though there were no climax, with some erudite remarks on the gypsies and their language. This tale, thus indifferently offered is, however, the capital presentment of Mérimée's determinist morality. It is, as Sainte-Beuve has ingeniously remarked, the "Manon Lescaut" of our century. The satanic power of love, the fatality that drags a

generous man from folly to vice, from vice to crime, from crime to murder and execution, has seldom received so concise and terrible a presentation. As in "Colomba," we are introduced gradually to a life and morality so strange that it might else remain unreal, and even with this precaution, while José Navarro, the soldier, smuggler, highwayman, and murderer,¹ is made acceptable to our imagination, there is more of the inexplicably demoniacal in Carmencita, the fascinating and savage Delilah, Gipsy cigar-girl and smugglers' spy, than there was in the Corsican maid. Once under her spell, he obeys because he must. His struggles to free himself involve him the more. At last, made frantic by her alternations of tender affection and faithlessness, swayed perhaps in his weakened will by her grim prophecy, "I first, then you," and hoping to the last that she will beg for mercy, he kills her and surrenders himself to certain execution, still doubting in his prison cell whether she were a poor misguided child or a demon, but knowing that she had destroyed him, body and soul.

Of that dainty bit of irony "l'Abbé Aubain" (1846), Mérimée's only story in letters, it may suffice to state the situation. A lady living in the country to restore her fortune by economy grows intimate with a young abbé, and finds him so sympathetic that she imagines him in love with her and so secures him a promotion that implies a removal, which he shrewdly or naively attributes to her conscious or unconscious love for him. Much of the interest of the story lies in the food for psychological speculation that its incompleteness affords. This, too, is a phase of literary affectation, but one that is easily pardoned.

It was apparently about the time of "l'Abbé Aubain" that Mérimée became interested in the Russian novelists Pushkin and Gogol. On the latter he wrote an article (1851), with translations of scenes from two stories; and from the former he rendered four tales, which though they bear the

¹ Compare with this character Mérimée's account of the bandit José Maria in his "Lettre de Madrid" of November, 1830.

stamp of Mérimée's individuality, interest us here only from the fact of his choice. The first, "La Dame de Pique" (1849), is a weird bit of ghostly diablerie and gambling culminating in insanity. "Les Bohémiens" (1852) is a tale of savage love and jealous murder, recalling "Carmen." "Le Hussard" (1852) is a phantasmagoria of witchcraft in four pages, and finally "Le Coup de Pistolet" (1856) shows the intense passions of a semicivilization in which admiration for skill and courage overcomes the deadliest hate. It seems then that, as was natural, Mérimée was attracted in others by the qualities that he himself possessed, by the intense, the exotic, and the exceptional.

Of original stories Mérimée wrote but three after the publication of the "Nouvelles" in 1852. These are "La Chambre Bleue,"¹ written in 1866; "Lokis," printed in 1869; and perhaps the posthumously published "Djoumane," though internal evidence would lead one to place this wild Algerian dream in the earlier and more romantic period, for though it opens with a clean-cut, realistic description of Gipsy snake-charmers it soon passes over into a weird fantastic vision of serpent caverns, oriental voluptuousness, and inhuman horrors much more in the spirit of 1830 than of the second empire. "La Chambre Bleue," a mediocre piece of rather gruesome fooling in the manner of the last century, with more snickering in the irony than is usual in Mérimée, seems to reflect the influence of the imperial court and the evenings at Compiègne, but "Lokis" carries us once more to the weird lands of crime and passion, interweaving the vampire and werwolf superstitions of the past with modern theories of heredity. Here a son, whose mother before his birth had lost her reason in a bear's embrace, couples the nature of his noble ancestors with brute ferocity. The bears have an instinct that he shares their nature, and ghastly presentiments prepare us from the outset for the denouement where, in excess of love, he sucks the life-blood of his

¹The MS. of this was presented to the Empress, found at the sack of the Tuileries, and then first printed in *l'Indépendance Belge*, September 7, 1871.

spouse and escapes to the beasts of the forest. The tale is treated with admirable restraint. There is the same artistic preparation here as in "Carmen" and "Colomba," gradually leading up to the foreboding presage of the soothsaying snake-charmer in the Lithuanian forest morass that hurries the story to its dreadful close.

But though the imagination be romantic, the style here and always is thoroughly realistic, and it is by this art that he succeeds in making "Lokis," "Carmen," or "Colomba" seem to us as natural to their environment as gloves and evening dress to our own. Thus he fascinates us by the extraordinary at the same time that he evokes our sympathy by the appearance of reality. This tends to give a certain malignity to his ironical skepticism. It has been said that he "despised" men too much to have faith in their progress. We shall not look for moral inspiration to one who could say of a drama, "The piece appears wearisome, although immoral;" nor can we look for intellectual inspiration to one who poses as a dilettante and is sure that to excel in any art "one must be a little *bête*." No doubt Mérimée toyed with morality and no doubt his fiction contributed to the weakening of the will that characterized his generation. But as an artist his work has a refined distinction that is the more charming for its seeming lack of effort, hiding the most consummate art of limpid harmony. His work appeals only to a refined taste and to that it will appeal always for its restrained and delicate sense of proportion, so singularly lacking in his naturalistic successors. He is in the novel what Gautier is in poetry, the representative of art for art's sake. His style has been compared to a sheet of glass through which all that he wishes to show appears clear and distinct, while the medium itself leaves at the first reading no sensation. Yet if the critic concentrate his attention on this style, he will find that all in it has been subordinated to an esthetic purpose that produced its full effect of aristocratic daintiness and elegance, even while unrecognized. Among all French novelists he is preeminently the artist. B. W. WELLS.